

**TESTIMONY OF SHERYL ABSHIRE,
DISTRICT ADMINISTRATIVE COORDINATOR OF TECHNOLOGY,
CALCASIEU PARISH PUBLIC SCHOOLS,
LAKE CHARLES, LOUISIANA**

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. It is a great honor to be asked to testify before you today in support of a program that I care for deeply – universal service and, especially, the E-Rate program – and in favor of S. 241, a bill that would ensure that universal service and E-Rate support continue to flow uninterrupted to deserving telephone consumers, schools and libraries.

My name is Sheryl Abshire and I have been the District Administrative Coordinator of Technology for Calcasieu Parish Public Schools in Lake Charles, Louisiana for the past 7 years. I have been an educator for more than 30 years, serving variously as a school principal, K-5 teacher, a library/media specialist, a classroom teacher, and an adjunct college professor. I have substantial experience with the integration of education technology into the classroom, including working with the International Society for Technology in Education to compile technology standards for teachers, students, and most recently school administrators.

Currently, I hold the Board Chair of the Consortium for School Networking – or CoSN, a non-profit education technology association that promotes the use of information technologies and the Internet to improve K-12 education. CoSN has long been a champion of the E-Rate program and views it as essential to attaining the high goals of the No Child Left Behind Act and preparing our students for today's competitive, high-tech oriented job market.

CoSN was greatly dismayed by the E-Rate program's shutdown last year as a result of the application of the Anti Deficiency Act to the E-Rate program. We strongly supported the ultimately successful efforts to gain a temporary exemption from a key provision of that Act for all of universal service, including the E-Rate. I come before you today to urge that last year's temporary exemption to the Anti Deficiency Act be made permanent and to state my support and that of the Consortium for School Networking for S. 241, a bill that would do just that.

I am also here representing the Education and Libraries Networks Coalition – or EdLiNC, an E-Rate advocacy organization that is comprised of every major public and private school organization, including CoSN, and the American Library Association. EdLiNC has advocated in support of the E-Rate program since its inception and continues to this day to work to address E-Rate implementation issues before Congress and the FCC.

I am attaching as part of my testimony today a letter (Exhibit A), signed by nineteen EdLiNC member organizations, that details the extraordinary impact that the E-Rate has had nationwide, particularly its success in improving public school classroom connections to the Internet from 14% in 1998, when the E-Rate first rolled-out, to 93% as of 2003. The letter also outlines how the E-Rate has been instrumental in improving education by affording students in rural and isolated areas the opportunity to take online courses in subjects not available in their schools. It has also permitted teachers to take online accreditation courses that help them attain the “highly qualified” status required by

the No Child Left Behind Act. In order to continue this good work, EdLiNC urges – as do CoSN and I – that Congress pass S. 241 and prevent a replay of last year’s devastating funding disruption.

While I have spoken of the tremendous national impact of the E-Rate, please allow me to say a few words about all that the E-Rate has done for my school district in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Calcasieu Parish Public Schools educates over 32,000 students and employs more than 5000 people. We are the sixth largest school district in the state and the largest employer in the parish. Thirty-six percent of our student population is from a minority group and fifty-three percent of all Calcasieu Parish students are eligible for the federal free-and-reduced price lunch program. Based on this last figure, Calcasieu Parish Public Schools qualified this year for a 72% E-Rate discount rate.

When the E-Rate began over seven years ago, our connectivity consisted of a few dial-up connections in our school libraries, and our technology professional development program consisted of random trainings to teach teachers just how to turn on the computers and, occasionally, how to use a specific program with a student.

Today, this has all changed. We now have over 11,000 computers connected to our network and, at any given moment, over 6000 of them are accessing the network. Each day, our students, teachers and administrators make more than 3 million web page or network object requests, send or receive over 30,000 email messages, and transmit 14.5 gigabytes of data. Last fall, the Center for Digital Education and National School Boards

Association recognized us as one of the most digitally advanced large district school boards in the country.

How did all of this occur in such a short period of time? The answer is the E-Rate.

Calcasieu Parish Public Schools has applied for E-Rate discounts in each of the program's first seven years, receiving to date just over \$4 million. A sizable chunk of this money has gone to support a currently ongoing infrastructure upgrade that, when completed, will support 100 megabit connections to all 11,000 desktops attached to our network. The vast majority of these funds have been used to support plain old telephone service, cellular phone service, the installation and upgrade of a high-speed network to all of our 59 schools, and the bandwidth used by our compressed video services.

I believe that we have made wise use of our E-Rate support. Each year, we have paid careful heed to our district's technology needs and its financial capabilities, as laid out in our collaboratively developed technology plan, and have only sought E-Rate discounts in accordance with documented needs. We have never attempted to "maximize our E-Rate discounts," nor have we "over-bought" technology or network resources with E-Rate support. At Calcasieu Parish Public Schools we understand that the E-Rate is a finite and precious resource, particularly since it has a hard annual cap of \$2.25 billion per year.

We also know, though, that our technology infrastructure is useless without ample instruction on how to use it and integrate it into the curriculum. For that reason, no

technology has been deployed in our district without intensive professional development for teachers and administrators. We provide intensive professional development courses annually to over 300 teachers and over 300 pre-service teacher candidates, rotating that training to different grade levels each year. Additionally, all teachers in our district actively participate in instructional technology training through online and face-to-face workshops and in-service trainings. These professional development efforts have paid-off with our recent national recognition for innovative use of online professional development using the Blackboard platform.

The real proof of the value of Calcasieu's and the E-Rate's investment in technological infrastructure, however, is its impact on our students. The formal mission of my department is to "*Advance Quality Education with Technology.*" The E-Rate is helping us accomplish this goal.

A prime example from Calcasieu Parish of which I am particularly proud is John F. Kennedy Elementary. A few years ago, Kennedy Elementary, a high poverty school where 95% of its students participate in the federal lunch program, was a failing school. Starting in 1998, we used E-Rate discounts to connect all of its classrooms to the Internet and strategically leveraged Title I dollars to purchase computers for each classroom. The district then established after school programs at Kennedy that targeted online technology resources to specific student needs that we identified through multiple assessment analyses.

The results have been outstanding. Last year, Kennedy Elementary was recognized as one of the leading schools in the state of Louisiana for closing the achievement gap among all groups in the school, performing above the state average in all school performance categories and successfully meeting AYP – Annual Yearly Progress as defined by NCLB. The U.S. Department of Education awarded Kennedy Elementary the Distinguished Schools Award for “outstanding achievement and progress towards the goal that all students achieve the state standards of academic excellence.” I am convinced that E-Rate played a significant role in this achievement by delivering the online educational resources that helped spur these incredible gains.

All of this leads me to implore you to make sure that the program remains not just in operation but smooth running and vibrant. The Universal Service Administrative Company shutdown of the program for three months last year was a major catastrophe for our district. Overall, it set back our infrastructure upgrade anywhere from six months to a year. This inability to complete our upgrade, in turn, caused extensive delays in fully implementing a new student information system and data warehouse, both of which are critical to improving instruction. The upgrade delay also caused us to eliminate our plans to launch bandwidth intensive video streaming resources in order to assure we had sufficient bandwidth to manage the district’s day-to-day network functions, such as basic Internet access, email, and attendance and grading systems. Finally, the upgrade delays caused by the shutdown derailed a long-planned upgrade of our library resources, which would have established a fully automated district-wide online resource center. What a tragedy for our teachers and students to be ready, willing and able to make use of all of

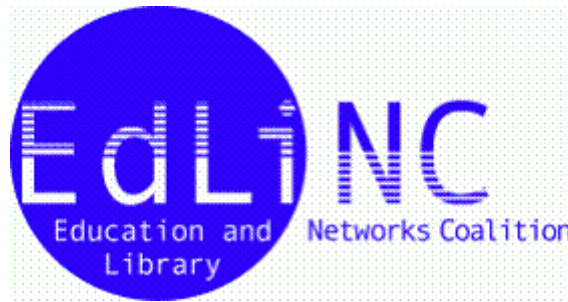
these fantastic new resources and to have to stand idle because of an E-Rate accounting issue!

Without the passage of a permanent exemption to the Anti Deficiency Act, we fear another shutdown for the E-Rate at the end of this year and even longer delays in building-out our network and providing the learning opportunities that are essential for today's students.

In sum, the E-Rate has been a blessing for my district, propelling it from a technological backwater to a nationally recognized technology model in six short years. Our students, teachers, library/media specialists and administrators have all benefited greatly from the distance learning courses, online professional development, and the wealth of Web-based material that the E-Rate has put at their fingertips. We continue to make significant progress academically in our schools, which, in no small measure, is helped by the E-Rate. Please help us continue our work by preventing any unnecessary disruptions to the program. Please pass S. 241.

I want to thank Senators Snowe and Rockefeller for introducing this bill, Chairman Stevens and Ranking Member Inouye for signing-on as original cosponsors, and all of the Senators who have added their support to this most important legislation. In particular, I want to thank Senator Stevens for holding this hearing today and giving me an opportunity to share my views on universal service and, most particularly, the E-Rate. I would be pleased to take any questions that you have.

Exhibit A



April 11, 2005

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The Education and Libraries Networks Coalition (EdLiNC) greatly appreciates the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee holding today's hearing on S. 241, critical legislation which would permanently exempt the Universal Service Fund from a particular provision of the Anti-Deficiency Act. EdLiNC is an organization that was formed by the leading public and private education organizations and the American Library Association to support the passage and implementation of the E-Rate program as part of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. We commend Senators Snowe and Rockefeller, Chairman Stevens and Ranking Member Inouye, as well as over twenty members of the Senate for co-sponsoring this important bill that would effectively ensure that E-Rate funds continue to flow to schools and libraries.

Without prompt Congressional passage of S. 241, we fear that all universal service programs face the prospect of significant and possibly protracted funding disbursement interruptions when the current temporary exemption to the ADA expires in December. EdLiNC fervently hopes that today's hearing will help speed the passage of S. 241 by the Senate and spur the House of Representatives to take similarly quick action on this legislation. At the conclusion of the 108th Congress, the Senate unanimously approved the existing one-year exemption. This exemption expires at the end of this calendar year and would thereby threaten the continued flow of vital E-Rate funds to schools and libraries.

Since it commenced operation in 1998, the E-Rate, which provides deep discounts to public and private schools and public libraries for telecommunications services, Internet access and internal connections, has played a leading role in connecting schools and libraries to the Internet. In 1998, only 14% of public school instructional classrooms were connected to the net; as of 2003, classroom Internet access stands at 93%. Nearly all public library outlets are now able to offer Internet access to their patrons. Private schools have benefited substantially, as well, with 88.4% of Catholic schools providing student Internet access. The E-Rate's continuing importance to schools and libraries is easily observable by the fact that, in each funding year, requests for E-Rate discounts vastly exceed the \$2.25 billion available annually. These funds are essential if schools and libraries are to remain connected to the Internet, the information super highway.

Beyond these impressive figures, though, the E-Rate is essential to schools and libraries for the educational and employment opportunities that it helps provide. A 2003 report commissioned by EdLiNC, entitled *E-Rate: A Vision of Opportunity and Innovation*, found the following about the program:

- The E-Rate is an important tool for economic empowerment in underserved communities
- The E-Rate is beginning to bring new learning opportunities to special education students
- The E-Rate is transforming education in rural America
- The E-Rate is helping schools improve student achievement and comply with the No Child Left Behind Act
- Schools and libraries are devoting significant resources and exercising great care in completing E-Rate applications

The story of two of the communities profiled in the 2003 report, the Kuspuk and Kuskokwim School Districts in Southwestern Alaska, provides an excellent illustration of the incomparable value of the E-Rate program. Although both of these remote, largely Eskimo and Native American villages are only accessible by single engine plane, snowmobile or boat, their students now enjoy the same online resources as their peers around the country thanks to the E-Rate program. Because of E-Rate supported connectivity, Kuspuk's teachers are able to exchange lesson plans with their counterparts in other locations and Kuskokwim's students are able to overcome the lack of certified math teachers in their area by taking online courses in math, algebra and geometry. As Kuspuk School District Superintendent Kim Langton summarized: "E-Rate funds are critical to the school and to the community; without E-Rate funds we would be hamstrung educationally."

S. 241 will ensure that E-Rate discounts continue to reach these schools and others like them uninterrupted. Last year, the program was suspended for three months, during which time thousands of applications from schools and libraries languished in the offices of the E-Rate's administrator. This de facto shutdown of the program occurred because the FCC determined that a particular ADA provision, which bars federal agencies from obligating funds without adequate cash on-hand to cover those obligations, applied to the E-Rate and the program's administrator realized that it had insufficient cash in its accounts to cover E-Rate funding commitment decision letters. At the same time, concerns were expressed that the universal service high cost fund's projections system might also fall within the ambit of the ADA, potentially causing a shutdown of that program. Fortunately, the 108th Congress passed and the President signed legislation to exempt for twelve months all of universal service from that ADA provision, thereby allowing E-Rate discounts to flow again.

However, we are drawing ever closer to another potential crisis for the E-Rate and universal service when the ADA exemption expires in December. Without passage of S. 241, the FCC would face the Hobson's choice of either shutting down the E-Rate and/or other universal service programs (rural healthcare, high cost telephone service, and low-income telephone service) for a period of time, thus depriving needed E-Rate discounts to deserving public and private schools and libraries, or raising the universal service collection rates dramatically, thereby virtually imposing major telephone rate hikes for consumers. Therefore, we urge you to preclude the FCC from making either of these bad choices and pass S. 241 to permanently exempt universal service from this single provision of the Anti Deficiency Act.

We thank you for your attention to this very critical issue, and urge you to support S. 241.

Sincerely,

American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
American Library Association
Association of Educational Service Agencies
Consortium for School Networking
Council of Chief State School Officers
International Society for Technology in Education
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Independent Schools
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Catholic Educational Association
National Education Association
National Education Knowledge Industry Association
National PTA
National Rural Education Advocacy Coalition
National School Boards Association
Organizations Concerned About Rural Education
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops